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ABSTRACT

Linking activities between knowledge production and actual practices in schools need to be guided by understanding of how educational organizations work. Educational organizations evidence unique organizational patterns, including diffuse goals, weak connections between activities and outcomes, political vulnerability, and working conditions that emphasize individual autonomy. As new knowledge is linked to schools and used by administrators and teachers, these organizational patterns create important opportunities and pitfalls. In schools, knowledge use and transformation may serve purposes other than the intended objective of change or reform. Knowledge utilization also provides legitimacy to existing programs, new enthusiasm, new beliefs, and an improved public image for the schools. New knowledge may also undermine existing relationships within schools or between schools and the outside environment. For instance, when knowledge is used to redefine roles or relationships, change practices, or alter characteristics of schools, conflicts arise. Without an adequate understanding of organizational realities in schools, efforts to increase the role of knowledge in change and reform will produce more problems than solutions. (Author/JM)

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Linkage and Information Use in Education Organizations

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Linkage and Information Use in Educational Organizations

by

Terrence E. Deal

The staggering increase in the volume of available knowledge during the past decade justifies the popular label - "knowledge explosion". The explosion has occurred in most sectors of the society. In the professions, practitioners - doctors, dentists, lawyers and teachers (as quasi-professionals) - are bombarded by an endless flow of periodicals, ideas, theories, and new practices. To keep current is nearly impossible; becoming obsolete slowly is a full-time job.

In education, national policy has directly encouraged the production of new knowledge through federally-funded research centers and national laboratories. These organizations employ social scientists and other professionals who translate theories and concepts of various disciplines into professional knowledge. Underlying the federal effort is an expectation that new knowledge will stimulate change and reform in the nations schools. But to bring about change and reform, it is not sufficient simply to produce new knowledge; knowledge must be applied, used, or somehow linked to activities and practices.

The move from producing knowledge to using knowledge is not simple. Direct federal support has stimulated a variety of conceptual labels for the process (Havelock, 1971): Knowledge Production and Utilization (KPU); Research Development and Dissemination (RD&D); and Research Development and Utilization (RDU). Underlying these conceptual labels are images of the process which have evolved from initial linear "top-down" designs (Guba and Clark, 1965) to those which are more interactive

or "configurational" (Clark and Guba, 1974). Federal support has also stimulated a variety of strategies for disseminating knowledge and increasing its use. The ERIC system, state dissemination units, or linking agents - housed inside or outside school systems - have been established to increase the flow and use of information among practitioners.

In a simplified view of the process, knowledge is: (1) produced by individuals or organizations; (2) linked through some specified set of activities; (3) and eventually used by teachers and administrators in local districts and schools to generate new approaches and practices. In the past, considerable attention has been focused on the first two aspects of the process: information and linkage. But, using knowledge to foster change, requires a well-grounded understanding of how educational organizations work and the dynamics that accompany attempts to make them different. How educational organizations are structured, the diverse functions they serve in communities, and the characteristics that make them different from other organizations are as critical to knowledge use or transformation as the production and transfer of new knowledge. Norms, incentives, roles, goals, structures, and other characteristics of the receiving organizations may significantly foster or inhibit the use of knowledge or linking efforts.

The purpose of this paper is to put the characteristics of educational organizations in the center stage of the knowledge production and utilization process. In doing so, I will be drawing from two sources: current organizational theory and my own direct experiences as a "linking agent". The discussion will unfold in four sections: (1) a profile of educational organizations; (2) the various purposes of knowledge use in schools and

districts; (3) some pitfalls of linkage and knowledge use and (4) some key issues suggested by viewing knowledge production and linkage from the perspective of insiders.

A Profile of Educational Organizations

For many years, educational systems were viewed from the perspective of theories developed within the business-industrial sector. But more recently, theorists have highlighted the important ways in which educational organizations (and other human service organizations) are different.

As an opener, educational goals are diverse and diffuse (Siber, 1975; Miles, 1975; March and Olsen, 1976). Second, the relationship between instructional activities and outcomes is problematic and difficult to specify (March and Olsen, 1976). Third, schools and districts are highly interpenetrated by and vulnerable to local events and politics (Siber, 1975; Miles, 1975). Fourth, the levels of educational organizations - district, school and classroom - are segmented or only loosely connected with one another. This looseness is particularly evident in instructional issues and activities (Deal, Meyer and Scott, 1975; Cohen, et. al. 1979). Fifth, evaluations are rarely used to discriminate between individual performances (Dornbush and Scott, 1976) or to guide important decisions (Deal and Huguenin, 1977). Sixth, within levels (district, school or classroom) individuals do not agree on important organizational issues. And within schools especially, the activities of teachers, specialists and administrators are not connected. Seventh, efforts to change these patterns have been largely unsuccessful (Baldridge and Deal, 1975) often resulting in internal or external conflict (Deal and Nutt, 1979).

Successful changes are encouraged by negotiation (Deal and Nutt, 1979) or adaptation (Berman and McLaughlin, 1975) of old and new producing a new synthesis.

For all these reasons, educational organizations operate on a wave length that is unique. But, in some views of levels of satisfaction, conflict, and other measures of organizational performance, the uniqueness of schools appears to be a satisfactory profile for many important constituencies (Meyer and Rowan, 1975).

But alongside satisfaction with the status quo there is a constant pressure for change and reform. Pressures for change come occasionally from within local communities. But usually pressures originate from professional or governmental sources. Many of these efforts to change schools emphasize tighter internal linkages: the activities of specialists are linked to classroom teachers, evaluations are linked to rewards or decisions, administrators are linked more closely with the classroom, goals are linked with instructional activities, or knowledge is linked with classroom instruction or administrative approaches.

But connecting parts in educational organizations more tightly may undermine other important purposes that existing patterns, events, and activities serve. Goals provide symbols for support, emotion, and debate; decision arenas provide opportunities for recognizing status, socialization and learning, and venting conflict (March and Olsen, 1976); evaluations provide important internal rituals which demonstrate the authority of the principal and the importance of good teaching; new roles, procedures, or practices may demonstrate to a local community responsiveness, modernity, or a concern for specific issues championed by vocal interest groups

(Meyer and Rowan, 1978); the activities of linking agents provide tangible evidence of up-to-date approaches; and the presence of new materials and products suggests that R and D efforts are relevant and that schools are innovative. In organizations like schools, the symbolic importance of these activities and events should not be underestimated. Neither should the organizational problems and potential community-school conflicts that may erupt if the linkages are pushed beyond a symbolic to a behavioral level. In sum, in organizations like schools where substance and effects are elusive, appearance and form assume more importance. Information and linking activities in educational organizations may thus serve important purposes that are different from those envisioned from a more rational view.

Diverse Purposes Served by Knowledge and Linkage

As new knowledge is disseminated and linked to educational organizations (by a variety of activities) several diverse purposes may be served:

First, in accordance with traditional logic, changes may actually occur in the way teachers and administrators view their work or in techniques, practices, or patterns of classrooms, schools or districts. Knowledge thus provides a basis for making needed changes or reforms.

Second, existing practices or procedures may be relabeled in accordance with new concepts and terminology. Teachers and administrators often feel insecure about "home-grown" programs even though these approaches are consistent with professional judgment and intuition. Where existing practices mesh with new knowledge, relabeling can provide needed sources of legitimacy and support.

Third, new knowledge or linking activities may provide excitement, enthusiasm, and an escape from boredom. Like any occupational group, teachers and administrators occasionally tire of doing the same things, in the same ways, with the same people day-after-day. A new idea, a novel experience, or changes in roles or relationships can kindle new excitement and spirit among even the most disillusioned teachers or administrators. New knowledge or activities designed to link knowledge with practice can provide important and needed sources of stimulation and hope for professionals whose occupational world has become stifling and mundane.

Fourth, new knowledge and linking activities can create opportunities for the creation of new meanings, beliefs, and myths. Educational technologies are based largely on beliefs about linkages between activities and desired outcomes. New knowledge in conjunction with sustained interaction among teachers and administrators may give rise to new ideologies or beliefs. In districts and schools, the creation and perpetuation of such beliefs are crucial for professional identity and individual meaning.

Finally, new knowledge and linking activities can contribute to how a school or district is perceived and supported by the local community. In educational organizations, effectiveness is very difficult to establish. Consequently, the reputation of a particular school or district is built largely on how appearance coincides with prevailing community myths and expectations (Meyer, Scott and Deal, 1975). In many communities, the image of an up-to-date school with modern pedagogical techniques is important as long as actual patterns or practices don't drift too far from the conventional form. Participating in a federally-funded R and D activity,

working with a linking agent, or incorporating new materials into instructional practices or evaluation procedures may help to cultivate an appropriate image in which local communities take pride and are willing to support.

Overall, current efforts at knowledge dissemination and use focus primarily on change and reform ignoring or disowning other important purposes that may be served by those activities. In educational organizations, because of unique characteristics and patterns, those other purposes may be worthy of more attention.

Pitfalls of Linkage and Knowledge Use

Linking activities and the use of knowledge in districts and schools serve diverse purposes - many of which fall outside the scope of intended effects. In addition, new knowledge and linking activities can produce undesirable results. By focusing solely on the role of knowledge and linkage in promoting change, several pitfalls might be anticipated:

First, where linking activities or the use of knowledge redefine roles or create new connections or more intense relationships between teachers, administrators, or other participants, conflict is likely to occur. Part of this conflict will arise around the ambiguity and uncertainty that change produces. But most of the conflict will center around intrusion of one group into the "turf" of others (Deal and Nutt, 1979). Existing organizational arrangements in schools usually permit teachers, administrators, and others to operate relatively independently. When efforts are connected more closely, conflict is almost inevitable. How the conflict is resolved will determine whether changes persist or

the status quo returns.

Second, where linking activities or new knowledge make ritualistic procedures more rational, internal conflict will result. Currently, for example, evaluations of teachers and administrators are plagued with problems of diffuse criteria, inadequate observations, and ineffective conferences (Dornbush and Scott, 1975). But, to make the evaluation procedures explicit and systematic will result in conflicts between participants thereby threatening morale and the delicate equilibrium of existing relationships.

Third, where new knowledge or linking activities lead to changes in the physical characteristics of schools - certification, roles and relationships of administrators, teachers, and students, or curriculum topics - conflicts will arise between schools and communities (Meyer and Rowan, 1975). Contracts are established between schools and communities which govern what schools can and cannot do to maintain community trust and support. Where new knowledge or linking activities lead to violation of boundary conditions, conflicts will surface which, if unresolved, can undermine the willingness of communities to support the schools. Communities judge schools on the basis of conformity to existing expectations. Proper form and appearance are crucial. Where knowledge is used or linking activities conducted which violate or lead to changes which abrogate the existing contract, the relationship between community and school is threatened (Deal and Nutt, 1979).

Fourth, systematic efforts to encourage knowledge use on a broad organizational basis (district or school) may undermine existing informal connections between professionals and the knowledge base. It is fairly

evident that individual administrators - and especially teachers - are able to select and try new ideas or practices without interference - as long as relationships or boundary conditions are unaffected. New ideas sweep through schools with great regularity on an informal basis. To formalize linkages between schools and knowledge may undermine the informal linkages - or be less effective than strategies which capitalize on these informal channels.

Finally, efforts to link knowledge and practices often emphasize knowledge that is produced by social scientists rather than knowledge that evolves from the experience of teachers or administrators - craft knowledge (Cohen and Phillips, in preparation). This emphasis often results in knowledge that is inappropriate. Either it does not interweave easily into existing "professional" approaches, or it does not produce the desired effects under a more complex set of conditions.

Conclusion

As new knowledge is linked to schools and used by administrators and teachers, unique organizational patterns - diffuse goals, weak connections between activities and outcomes, political vulnerability, and working conditions which emphasize individual autonomy - create important opportunities and pitfalls. In schools, knowledge use and transformation may serve important purposes other than the intended objective of change or reform. Knowledge may also undermine existing relationships within schools or between schools and the outside environment. Without an adequate understanding of organizational realities in schools, efforts to increase the role of knowledge in change and reform will produce more

problems than solutions. Linking activities need to be guided by knowledge of how educational organizations work.

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